

The challenges of teaching English in prisons. Part I

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Abstract

This article has attempted to present a brief analysis of the challenges of teaching English in prisons. Offenders have certain needs that must be met if they are to continue in the education system. The TPR technique and the kinesthetic approach to language learning furnish a constant stimulus for the development of students' self-esteem. These different mechanisms differ from mainstream education and are a flexible means of getting outcast groups back on track. Standardized practices need to be replaced by teaching methods that make students feel empowered as this is closely correlated with motivation and progress.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR), Kinesthetic Learning, Games and Songs, Self-esteem, Stereotypes

Título: Desafíos de la enseñanza del inglés en centros penitenciarios. Primera parte.

Resumen

En este artículo se describen los desafíos de la enseñanza del inglés en centros penitenciarios. Los internos presentan una serie de necesidades que deben ser tenidas en cuenta para facilitar su inserción en el sistema educativo. El aprendizaje kinestésico y los mecanismos de "respuesta física" se constituyen como la base para el correcto desarrollo de la autoestima del alumno. Los métodos tradicionales de enseñanza deben ser sustituidos por otros que desarrollen el potencial de grupos marginales y desfavorecidos y fomenten el vínculo entre motivación y aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Respuesta Física Total (TPR), Aprendizaje Kinestésico, Juegos y Canciones, Autoestima, Estereotipos.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching in prisons offers a fascinating opportunity for investigation in the dynamics of adult education and social exclusion. Prisoners occupy a low position in society. They are held in low regard and enjoy little esteem. The division of the world by good and evil still prevails in spite of attempts to overcome stereotypes. When we think of offenders, the image that immediately comes to mind is villains in dark alleyways and slums. But the reality of prison life differs from pernicious stereotypes and generalizations. It is more about issues that require sensitive handling: drug addiction, alcoholism or abuse, among others.

Being a teacher in a school prison involves dealing with the psychological impact on those who are assigned a role or a stereotype as a result of their disadvantaged and marginalized origins. Criminals are a product of society due to little opportunity, inequality and violent environments. They are part of outcast groups who have dropped out of the formal education system. Their enforced isolation from the society that condemns and rejects them creates a stigma in them. They are bound to feel themselves caught, undervalued and isolated. They are frightened of success and have been trained to regard themselves as useless and limited. In a word, they feel excluded by social marginalization.

The reality of prison life is shocking and at times disturbing. Teachers have to deal with students who dropped out of school at a young age and have not been in formal education for a number of years. Inmates come back to school life with low literacy levels in Spanish, let alone in English as a foreign language. Their brains decline as they get older. Therefore we should always have high expectations according to their levels and make learning meaningful for them.

The disparity of levels is another issue when teaching in a penitentiary facility. Many students are on the verge of illiteracy, barely able to read and write or even to speak with fluency in their native language. Some are young and have just entered the prison walls, whereas others are old and have spent most of their lives coming in and out of prison with a high degree of recidivism. There is never the same number of students in the lesson: some have to attend criminal proceedings while others have been granted short-term leave for a few days. Some of them have to deal with drug related issues, alcoholism or loneliness, whereas others suffer from serious health condition, anxiety and depression. The

common ground between them is that they are as needy and desperate for affection and teacher approval as secondary school children.

Contrary to popular belief, challenging behavior is not an issue. Students look up to their teachers with admiration and respect. The teacher becomes a leader, a shoulder to cry on, and is often regarded as a source of guidance and support. Inmates come to lessons with low self-esteem and basic language skills, if any. *"I am not able to", "I am not good at" "I am not worth it" "it is too late for me" "I can't"* are recurrent when taking the first steps into a foreign language, never mind when you are a social outcast. Students come with very little formal instruction. They get easily frustrated and discouraged by feelings of inability and worthlessness as human beings and individuals. They have lost confidence in themselves as much as society has lost confidence in them. Tough guys struggle with active participation in activities as they do not want to make a fool of themselves and get exposed to public scorn and ridicule.

Good rapport must be established from the beginning in order to make learners feel appreciated as valid human beings. Appraisal should play a crucial role in learning to take students on board. To get inmates back on track there must be a change in the teaching approach. Teachers must create a learning environment where students can enjoy some fun and words of encouragement, which are highly appreciated, become the key to success, especially when dealing with disaffected individuals.

Education must have an end and some of these ends have to do with personal satisfaction and development as well as the acquisition of basic learning skills. But education should achieve a higher purpose: social rehabilitation and prevention from recidivism. Teachers must therefore help each and every person and meet their individual needs.

TEACHING APPROACH: TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

Formal instruction methods used in mainstream education are not effective in prisons, where language acquisition becomes a priority over language learning. Due to the challenges of prison life (where rules control school timetables and activities), teachers must simplify the curriculum, adopt new methods and adapt them to meet the needs of their students. They have to plan activities that take inmates through a journey of self-satisfaction and learning. The TPR technique (Total Physical Response), developed by professor of psychology James Asher in the late 1960s, is very popular and useful when teaching adult beginners. Adults feel more confident and become less aware of any potential embarrassment when they are actively engaged in fun and purposeful tasks. TPR is closely related to kinesthetic learning, defined as the use of the body to do or to create something. Kinesthesia, a modern Latin compound of Greek *kinein* "to set in motion" and *aesthesis* "perception", takes place through physical activities (listening and doing). Learners may be reluctant at first to conduct the tasks set, but they will soon lose self-consciousness and the activities become stress-free. Students will begin to enjoy learning through actions as we keep them up and about.

A PRACTICAL-BASED APPROACH ON SIMPLE VOCABULARY TIMES.

Inmates need memorable learning experiences where they leave the classroom feeling good. During the first stages of teaching, learning should be kinesthetic with lots of actions and hands-on tasks as this dramatically improves motivation and self-esteem. The learning process should become more natural and focus on meaning rather than form. Each task should be an invitation for language fun and engagement where students laugh and learn. Teachers need to make students aware of their progress by meeting realistic goals in every lesson so that they can develop trust and a more positive sense of themselves. Teachers need to make students feel empowered.

The source of a man's power lies in his status, which in turn derives from his ability to achieve "something". Esteem is attached to the ability to perform simple tasks and to understand basic instructions and vocabulary items. Inmates may respond aggressively at the beginning since learning is a frightening experience and tough guys do not want to expose themselves. Challenging low self-esteem is a constant battle at the beginning of the learning process until we understand that FEAR is behind students' unwillingness to learn and to participate actively and effectively in language lessons. Without proper motivation the tasks are over in just a few seconds or do not even start. But with the right encouragement, students unconsciously absorb the language and are open to new learning experiences. As they play with the language, words are magically stored in their brains. Fun makes learning memorable in an environment where they feel relaxed and secure.

Teachers should start with simple “listen and respond” activities where students use their bodies as a spring board for production and experimentation as they take their first steps in language learning. Learners will feel highly motivated as they actively perform the tasks set and understand a few words in English. When they dare to succeed, they will soon realize that they can actually do something in a foreign language. This becomes a confidence boost for them and has a positive impact on their self-esteem as they can do something by themselves all alone.

Students will not be required to say the words at the beginning. They should not worry about correct pronunciation or intonation as word comprehension comes before production. Students just observe and perform in silence. It may seem that they are learning nothing as no words come out of their mouths. But a lot is involved in this process: they listen, understand and respond as required. They are actually communicating silently in a foreign language. At the same time fun removes the tension that might otherwise take over the lesson. The more isolated an individual is, the slower the change. Here comes the need for the stimulating benefit of songs and games, team work (pair work or group work activities) and kinesthetic learning, TPR techniques and hands-on tasks.

TPR TECHNIQUE: A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE ON “PARTS OF THE BODY”.

A) Songs: “Heads and shoulders, knees and toes”.

Teachers can present new vocabulary items with “*Heads and shoulders, knees and toes*”, a classic song that involves movement with its repetitive lyrics and simple words. Regardless of the age and background of the student, songs are a great motivating tool to maintain learners’ interest and willingness to succeed. Songs make language easy to remember as new vocabulary items are reinforced with repetition. This particular song is suitable to learners of all abilities.

“Songs also give a chance to develop automaticity which is the main cognitive reason for using songs in the classroom (Schoepp 2001). Automaticity is defined as “a component of language fluency which involves both knowing what to say and producing language rapidly without pauses” (Gatbonton – Segalowitz 1988: 473). To put it in other words, songs may help automatize the language improvement process. Essentially, the students should be placed in an environment in which it is possible to use the target language in a communicative way (Gatbonton – Segalowitz 1988: 476). As a matter of fact, the nature of songs is said to be quite repetitive, logical and persistent”. [...]. Another important factor making a song valuable for an English lesson is that it may create really favourable conditions for learning. Murphey (1992: 6) is of the opinion that “the use of music and songs can stimulate very positive associations to the study of a language, which otherwise may only be seen as a laborious task, entailing exams, frustration, and corrections”. People usually identify songs with fun, which is why learning through songs is associated with an enjoyable atmosphere. Moreover, music may be used to relax students since for many learning a new language is a new experience. Our mother tongue – our basis of communication, is in some classes forbidden to use and learners may feel lost or helpless (Griffiee 1992: 4). (Kusnierek: 23-24)

B) Game: A variation of “Simon says”.

A song could be followed by a game. “*Simon says*” is a common and popular exercise in MFL teaching. But this most common instructions game (*touch your nose/touch your mouth...*), can be taken further and turned into a light-hearted activity by asking students to *touch each other*. Students actually place their heads against their partner’s head or their noses against their classmates’ nose. This may be embarrassing at first but the initial embarrassment soon turns into a lot of fun as students start to laugh. This activity makes students feel more and more relaxed as they progress through sensory learning. The act of responding physically to the teacher’s instructions helps them memorize the new language and be in control of their own learning. Teachers have to create an environment that is learner-friendly. As students are touching each other’s heads, legs and shoulders, they are experiencing the language itself.

This activity is an excellent ice breaker, although it may be disturbing at the beginning of any lesson as inmates are not used to physical contact. The teacher has to pantomime the activity first so that students can develop some trust in themselves. If students see teachers making a fool of themselves, they will soon follow and get engaged in fun language body conversations. Inmates will respond confidently as their anxiety disappears through games. Learners have the opportunity to develop basic social skills like cooperative team work. They learn a lot when they become physical. A vocabulary-oriented game with a twist like “*Simon says*” is to use post-its instead. When the teacher gives instructions, students have to stick a post-it on their classmates’ heads, knees or toes. When covered in post-its, students will experience enjoyment and fun.

Teachers can take this activity even further and every time students get things right they move a step forward towards an imaginary finish line. When they reach the line they get points that will turn into rewards like sweets or chocolates (always exciting as there is no access to such treats in prison). This way the game becomes competitive as they all aim for a reward, and excitement arises.

Learners associate actions with new words by virtue of a physical contact game. There is no pressure on production as learning takes place without their being self-conscious of their own progress. As they understand the words without pressure, production will come later without effort in a stress-free learning environment. Students feel that a foreign language is not out of reach. We may feel that not much learning is taking place, but students with little or no previous contact with the language and with a low level of literacy and self-esteem actually feel that they have achieved a great deal. And that is rewarding and satisfying for them. Those who felt initially useless now prove themselves capable and clever. Students usually feel overwhelmed by their inability and initial lack of knowledge, but that feeling soon begins to wear off with the right motivation. The way students feel should always be taken into consideration and become an integral part of any lesson plan, since lack of confidence makes learning difficult at the same time that lack of knowledge lowers self-esteem.

C) Game: "Freeze"

The previous activities may be followed by a reinforcement task: the "Freeze" game. This game is ideal to practice vocabulary with flashcards. First, teachers teach students the meaning of the word "Freeze!". The teacher holds a set of flashcards over his head (he is not allowed to see the cards), chooses a word, says it aloud as he passes the cards one by one. When students recognize the picture, they shout, "Freeze!" Every time a student gets one word right, (s)he comes to the front of the room to be in charge of the activity. Students will take it in turns to be the game leaders, choosing words and passing them over their heads for other students to guess.

D) Twister game

Learners gradually follow more complex instructions as the lesson progresses. Students who once struggled with the language end up with a broad grin on their faces as they can follow more complex sentence fragments (imperative verbs, possessives and prepositions). As they begin to build up and develop their first sentences, new words can be gradually introduced in the process: "right" or "left". Words that describe objects are now integrated into sentences that refer to actions and instructions. Students hear the language being used as language becomes an instrument of communication and socialization.

Place your head on your hand

Place **your** finger on your nose

Place your nose **on** the table

Place your elbow on your leg

Place your **right** hand on your mouth

Place your **left** foot on your knee

CONCLUSION

Lesson preparation becomes more complex in prisons as it should be the product of conscious thought and planning, adaptable to the special needs of students. Old teaching methods no longer suffice to offer the right guidance and support to those who are seen from the start as despicable. Education should be used as an instrument of social rehabilitation and social change. Learning should be something different from a mere compilation of vocabulary items and grammatical rules. It should be designed to boost the confidence of those who no longer believe in themselves. As a consequence, education should not be out of line with learners. Teachers need to constantly analyze the ends and methods that serve better than any other to get outcasts back on board and to select activities and plan lesson that result in gratification and confidence.

The way to understand education in penitentiary facilities is to see how progress and self-esteem are mutually interdependent. Formal instruction will not make of a marginalized student a confident learner. Education is more about the integral development of the student. In order to build confidence, teachers have to plan activities that promote a sense of togetherness. They need to win their students' minds, souls and hearts.

In sum, we need to generate trust to be trusted. We need to plan activities that are worthwhile to make student feel they are worth it.

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